

Interview with William E. Ryerson

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The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR WILLIAM E. RYERSON

Interviewed by: William D. Morgan

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SUMMARY: Ambassador Ryerson, in an enthusiastic, frank and highly professional manner, recounts his over 20 years in the foreign service. The highlights are from the outset of the interview focused on his unique, exciting and extraordinarily demanding present assignment as ambassador of Albania. Not only does he tell personal tales of daily living, including about present day personalities highlighted by Secretary Baker's visit, but he gives practical examples of directing the consular programs in a constantly evolving—perhaps exploding—setting. He then carries the consular examples through tours in Barbados and Poznan and then on to the demanding jobs in Bonn and Belgrade. Finally, he gives his frank and explicit views, opinions and critique of past, present and possible future immigration laws and procedures as seen from the special vantage points of three assignments in the Visa Office, most recently as its deputy director. The Ambassador mixes well his real-world experiences in consular and general foreign service assignments both at home and abroad.

BIOGRAPHY: William E. Ryerson entered the U.S. Foreign Service in January 1961. His first tour was as staff assistant in the U.S. Mission in Berlin. He then went on, with the exception of assignments on the German desk and the State Department's Operation Center, to a consular designated positions. These included Barbados, Poznan, Bonn and

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Belgrade. He also served three separate tours in the Visa Office, Bureau of Consular Affairs. His present ambassadorial assignment came as the result of his knowledge of a number of foreign languages, including Albanian, his top-notch credentials and performance in varied experiences in the foreign service...and perhaps a tad of luck to be in the right place at the right time.

INTERVIEW: Bill Ryerson is presently our ambassador to Tirana, Albania, our first, maybe ever, or certainly in a long time. Bill has given us a few hours of his precious time in Washington, to talk something about his career, and more specifically, about his extensive experience in consular work.

Q: Bill, you're most welcome.

RYERSON: It's good to be back in the United States. Albania is great, but there are some limitations. But, you asked about the background, and how I came to come into the foreign service. A little bit by accident, part of it related to...flunking out of college twice. The lesson I learned from it was: one I'm not an engineer; and two, I ought to do what I enjoy doing. And that kind of carried over even after I got in the foreign service. And, is one of the reasons I ended up doing as much consular work as I did, because I found that I like it. I entered with the usual sorts of prejudices that consular work was something you relegated to the step child of the janitor.

Q: Did you enter with those biases or were you taught those once on board?

RYERSON: Who knows where prejudice starts. I don't know. I guess I, knowing relatively little about the foreign service, I must have picked them up after entering, but it started off actually in Washington, because I figured I didn't really know much about the department, so I just learned. And I learned very quickly that I didn't want to be assigned to the department. Instead, I was out trying to get myself assigned to Berlin. Which had been, I realized later, years later, had been a kind of motivation for going into the foreign service. An old National Geographic article I read as a child. But, I went back and found it in the

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Fairfax County library about two years ago, actually went back and found the edition of the thing. So, I did go the Berlin.

Q: Before we get into your Berlin assignment, did you come to the service directly from university, or did you have any outside experience?

RYERSON: Just summer jobs while at the university, and then took a one semester course in architecture while waiting for the service to say, "We want you!"

Q: So your drive toward the foreign service was really more based on general interest, nothing explicit?

RYERSON: In fact, I took the foreign service exam almost by accident. Not really. And then got intrigued by it because it was the first multiple guess exam that I never finished. And I thought, what do these buggers know, they must be pretty good. So, I'll go on and continue the other two parts or the other three parts of the exam, you know. The medical, and the background, and all that stuff.

Q: What time frame are we in Bill? What was the date of your entry?

RYERSON: Ancient history. I ...

Q: Not quite.

RYERSON: I entered in January of '61, just a few days after Kennedy was sworn in. And the ice was still all over Washington. Just one semester after graduating in June of '60.

Q: Now on to Berlin.

RYERSON: Oh, to Berlin, and the job was staff aide to the minister at the U.S. mission in Berlin. But, you will be amused, but I had to explain to some relatives that no, this was not a religious mission and the minister was not a man who wore his collar backward. But this

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was a peculiar place because of Berlin's status. Berlin became then a very special kind of place. My wife was a foreign service officer and had been assigned in Berlin previously. Three of our four kids were born there. I served subsequently as Berlin desk officer in the Department of State many years later. So Berlin is had a kind of special place. I'm one of those people who built a career on the esoteric rules and regulations of Berlin access, and the Clay-Sokolovski agreements in 1946, regulating coaxial cable usage and all those good things.

Q: And even maybe...what do they call them on trucks? They go up and down...and we almost went to war over them.

RYERSON: Access into trucks!

Q: Tailgates! Tailgates!

RYERSON: Tailgates. The incident to which you refer happened because we changed truck models. It had nothing to do with Berlin, the truck beds were a bit higher, the tailgates were a bit higher, and the Soviets, ever clever, sent one of their shortest officers around to sort of inspect trucks. We didn't admit that they inspected, that they sort of looked in. Well this little beggar couldn't see over the back of the truck! And a great big sergeant, American army sergeant, said, "That's O.K. son." And picked up this Soviet lieutenant and held him up. (laughs) That nearly caused certain hairs to fall and eyebrows to raise, and so on. But...

Q: One more example of the real world of diplomacy; and international politics.

RYERSON: Yes, right. It's metal grip by sergeants who don't know any better, which is...

Q: Or are too short!

RYERSON: Well the sergeant was tall!

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Q: *The other one...*

RYERSON: It was the Russian lieutenant who was too short.

Q: *Bill, it must be something to start off in Berlin and talk about tailgates and 1961, and be in 1992, in Albania, of all places, looking back. We all are so amazed, especially those who have served in that part of the world—the Soviet Union, or wherever—to think of what's happened. It's unbelievable. You must be, maybe one of the top folk in the world to be shocked by what's happened. Any views on that? You have lots of them.*

RYERSON: How many days do I have to talk? Actually there's a curious parallel with Berlin. And as far as I know, I'm the only person who would have seen both the visit of John F. Kennedy to Berlin and James Baker, to Tirana. The reception was different, obviously; Berlin and Tirana are vastly different cities. And Albanians lived in isolation and self-isolation for half a century, basically. But, an enormous outpouring of people, this huge emotional gushing forth that happened when Kennedy went to Berlin and happened again when Secretary Baker came to Tirana in June of '91. They're very similar kinds of experiences. They're kind of like exclamation marks on both ends of my career, as it were.

Q: *Yes. So Baker had a comparable Berlin experience? Did he have something to say?*

RYERSON: He had something to say, he turned his three and a half hour visit into about a six hour visit. When he heard from my deputy and from me, a couple days before hand, that there had been rallies leading up to...

Q: *You were in Tirana at the time?*

RYERSON: I was in Tirana as sort of the door stop. They needed somebody in Tirana. I spoke a little Albanian, which I'd learned on my own in Belgrade. And I was there just holding a place until we could get an ambassador named. Got word, with six days notice, that the Secretary of State was coming. Honk! And please be at the airport tomorrow

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to pick up three, no make that five people from the advance team that are coming in. Basically trying to see what was necessary to set up a new post. Well we knew what we were going to do to set it up. Because we owned property. We owned, it's about five acres, and a house that was built for us.

Q: This was back in the 19—?

RYERSON: In the 1929-30's. It was built by the American School of Tirana. Founded by the American Junior Red Cross. You want trivia about Albania, I can give you trivia about Albania.

Q: These days, I don't think there's any trivia about Albania. (laugh) They're all unique stories.

RYERSON: They're a...yes. Anyway, when the Secretary heard that there was this great response, because Chris Hill and I had gone first to Kavaja.

Q: Hill?

RYERSON: Hill. He's now my deputy. I picked him as DCM, based in large part on the experience of this one week in Tirana. We got mobbed. Have you ever been cheered at by a crowd of about 7,000 people?

Q: No, not even by one! I don't think, but.

RYERSON: And had babies thrust at you to be kissed, actually people holding up children and pushing them toward us to be kissed!

Q: Rather than an autograph, they wanted you to kiss their child?

RYERSON: Kiss their child, and we got in touch with the Secretary's party and said, you know, tighten your wigs, because when you get here there's going to be quite a do. The

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Secretary heard about this, and decided that if that many people were coming out to greet him, he ought to say a few words to them. And that was the origin of him speaking to roughly ten percent of the population of Albania, which turned out in Tirana to meet him. And the most sort of touching thing of it all, was one sign in the crowd, in English, "Mr. Baker, we've waited 50 years for your visit!"

Q: Wow! He had to be moved. Some of us look at Mr. Baker as semi-cold fish, but that must have been a very emotional...

RYERSON: I've had other people tell me that he's, not often stirred; he was stirred. Almost shaken. The crowd mobbed the motorcade, kissing the windshield of his car. They were kissing the windshield of the car I was riding in, and I was four cars back! It was...it was, I had heard said that (and I this, perhaps can get published after a few years, and not right away). The wife of a senior official, a member of the communist party, said that when he was on the platform with Mr. Baker in the square, that that was the first time in his life he felt he could speak freely about what he thought.

Q: It was truly a captive nation, wasn't it!

RYERSON: It was a captive nation, and that visit was a catharsis. It was just pouring out!

Q: We know that we can't spend this whole interview on Albania. We have to bring you up to date from your Berlin days. But nevertheless, tell us, since you have gone there as ambassador, what you have noticed in terms of their reaction to being free, or freer? How has it manifest?

RYERSON: Fear is no longer there. It was manifested in a great vote to throw the rascals out in March 22, of this year, when they elected the first democratic government since 1924, in Albania.

Q: When did we leave, when were our relations ended, last?

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RYERSON: Well, they were ended by the Italian invasion of 1939. We sent a mission in 1945-46, and the mission was withdrawn in November of '46, 'cause we couldn't get anywhere or do anything because the regime was just being awful in all senses of the term. But that wasn't just to us, it was to the world. They were being awful to the world! They were ideologically very pure communists. Broke vigorously with Tito in 1948, when Tito was expelled from the Comintern. They broke with the Soviets in 1961, actually broke diplomatic relations, because of this rightist deviation by Khrushchev. And the Albanians were correct.

Q: He indeed was, a deviationist! (laugh)

RYERSON: And they essentially, although they didn't break diplomatic relations, they broke off with China, which was playing footsie with Richard Nixon. Q: There wasn't anybody left but the Albanians to be the pure Marxist.

RYERSON: Hey, if you're pure, what do you care! But the result was...

Q: Destruction of the nation!

RYERSON: Awful, awful spiritual destruction, no investment of the country, basically since the break with China in '78, and they'd been living off capital ever since.

Q: What kind of capital did they have? Did they have resources of any sorts?

RYERSON: They have resources. They have the potential for tourism, which is potential still. Very little infrastructure to support it, but gorgeous unspoiled beaches, and rocky cliffs. Copper, chrome, third largest chrome producer in the world, after the Soviet Union and South Africa...some ferro-nickel, and oil.

Q: So a lot of your work now as the ambassador is to get U.S. interests interested, and arrangements between the countries going to exploit this, in the good sense of the word.

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RYERSON: Yes. Exploit it, encourage investment, encourage American business interest. There's a natural, sort of, connection with the U.S., and that expression that Baker received, was unique to the United States. There had been a visit...a week and a half before of the Italian foreign minister and of the German foreign minister...

Q: The most logical, close countries.

RYERSON: Yes. Di Michelis and Genscher were both there! And within a week of Genscher's trip, there was Baker, and you know, a couple thousand people turned out to see Genscher. I know, I was there, I saw it. But...it was just nothing like the reception for Baker. The Albanian love affair with the United States started with Woodrow Wilson, who prevented the country from being wiped off the map in Europe!

Q: While we were dividing up Europe?

RYERSON: Well, yes. The peace conference in Paris, and Serbia, Greece, Italy and France...

Q: Were going to divide it.

RYERSON: Were going to just say, that's it. Umm...he said, "nothing of the sort", and it stuck. And the love affair continued when in June of '24, the founder of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, Bishop Fan Noli who founded the church in Boston, please note it, became Prime Minister. He was chased out by Ahmet Zogu, the then Interior Minister, later King Zog, better known as. Yes, but there is this American connection.

Q: You forewarned me Bill, before we started this interview, about pushing your Albanian button. But it's a very obvious button to push since you've only been there what, six, eight months, and now are back tomorrow or the next day. But I feel compelled to push the button just a little bit more, but at the same time turn our interview in the consular direction.

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Tell us something about the consular issues you see there, especially the migration of people, these people who were in such misery and in a sense, captivity. Are more free to emigrate freely?

RYERSON: For decades, Albanian shot people who tried to leave, now people leave, they don't get shot at, many of them don't bother to stop and get a passport, they just sort of hop on a passing boat, or hijack one, and we've seen exoduses.

Q: To Italy?

RYERSON: To Italy, there were exoduses across the land border to Greece. Nobody in his right mind goes to...Yugoslavia does not exist. And it should be recognized that it doesn't. Serbia and Montenegro, and Kosovo. Albania is a peculiar country. Everywhere on it's borders, outside it's borders, there are Albanians. Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, even to a certain extent in Greece, although a number were expelled from Greece.

Q: But now that Albanians could leave, if they wanted, they still couldn't just flow across the border into one of these neighboring Albanian areas?

RYERSON: Well, there were only two borders to flow in, well three now. Montenegro, sort of going around from the sea, Montenegro, Serbia, more probably the Kosovo area of Serbia, Macedonia, which is independent, not yet recognized...

Q: Having troubles with the spelling of Macedonia!

RYERSON: Right, they should consult the Vice President! (laughs) But an "e" on the end, and maybe it would work. I don't know. ..no it is said by some to be simply an excuse for other things in Greek policy. And the other land port is Greece.

Q: And they're all have Albanians across on the Greece side.

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RYERSON: Some. The largest population of Albanians outside of Albania, is perhaps in Turkey. They were a loyal province of the empire. The next largest population is in the United States. But then, maybe, oh, you hear from two to 500,000, but certainly a great number. And there is great interest in ties with the U.S. A great interest in coming to see relatives they've not see in 20, 30, 40, 50 years.

Q: What kind of visa business do you have in Albania? Have you been, have you set up an arrangement to issue non-immigrant and immigration visas?

RYERSON: Are obscenities allowed on this tape? (laughs)

Q: We could erase them! They're allowed in the first instance!

RYERSON: Well, no we haven't. We're not issuing visas. We don't have the facilities to do it in. We're trying to get the Foreign Buildings Office to do the necessary.

Q: You want to, I take it?

RYERSON: Do brown bears live in the woods? I mean, yes!...we want to, and very many people want us to, and we spend a hell of a lot energy, quite frankly, telling people why we can't issue visas. And then, in those cases where you just have to do something, then arranging to get a letter of introduction to the consulate general in Athens, and a letter of introduction to the Greek embassy in Tirana, so that people can get a transit visa to go to Athens to apply for a United States visa. And, of course, you can't guarantee that it will be issued.

Q: They get travel documents from their government, all right?

RYERSON: Oh, yes. That's no problem, no.

Library of Congress

Q: So at least if they can find a consular section in a U.S. embassy or a consulate somewhere...

RYERSON: Yes, well there are stories that to get a visa to get out of Albania, a foreign visa, you have to bribe someone. We know this will be a problem when we start. And absolutely will not tolerate a hint of bribery, and anybody who tries to...

Q: But you're not going to get away with it.

RYERSON: No. But anybody who tries to bribe, is going to find themselves waiting a hell of a long time to get a visa to the United States.

Q: We have a quota, obviously the same as always.

RYERSON: You're talking about immigration.

Q: Yes, well I'm talking about both.

RYERSON: Visitors and immigration, we will probably have plenty. I was there last Spring for three and a half months. And during that time, living in a hotel and sort of operating out of a hotel room. Lots of people approached me. "I was born in the United States." Oh, o.k. You would be entitled a passport, but you'd have to go to Athens or Rome or Vienna or Tokyo or some place to get it. My guess what that we have forty or fifty cases like this. The Italian ambassador had told me that they had turned up something like 170 Italian citizens, that sort of started coming out of the woodwork when it was no longer dangerous to do so. I ended up with over a thousand American citizens.

Q: And yet you can't refuse an American citizen a passport, can you?

RYERSON: Well, of course not! You don't refuse a citizen a passport, he has a right to that. He has as much right to an American passport as you do!

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Q: So you tell him he has to get an Albanian passport in order to get out of the country to go somewhere to...

RYERSON: No. No. He can get an Albanian passport. That's trivial...

Q: That won't jeopardize his nationality...

RYERSON: The problem, no, the greater problem is that he has to pay \$65.00 for his U.S. passport. That represents three months' wages, or four month's wages. And there are a couple of tragic cases, one instance that I know of, that I checked out last Spring. Three siblings, papa was an American, became a citizen in 192X...whatever it was. Went back to Albania, married in the old tradition, got a bride from home. And after the marriage there were born three children. One in 1930, one in '34 and one in '36. Girl, boy, girl. Papa acted as an interpreter for UNRAA right after the war. As was done with many other persons who had that kind of American connection. He was arrested by the Hoxha regime, tortured, executed. And because of that, anybody with that kind of a political taint, was in greatest danger. But the family tucked away papa's certification of naturalization under a rafter somewhere. And there is stayed all these years until last year, they got it out. And I had a look at it, and at the birth records, I knew when papa had become a citizen. Fine, they were citizens at birth. For the latter two, there was a retention requirement, but there wasn't for the first. The department ultimately waived the retention requirement, but just think about...

Q: A little hard to comply with, under those circumstances.

RYERSON: Fine. yes, that's no problem. That's the trivial part. But these people had been living since 1946 with a fantasy that somehow, if relations ever got restored with the United States, their lives would become better. And they asked whether they would be entitled to a pension in the United States? And the answer is no. They've never been in the U.S. They've never worked here.

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Q: No social security ties at all. (Laugh)

RYERSON: Would maybe be entitled to an apartment? No. Yes, to you it's funny. To them it's deadly serious. (Laughs) I'm laughing not in humor. And these people's lives have been distorted. I used to fear running into those people on the streets of Tirana. And I walked around a lot, and I established a kind of persona, walking around and saving Government money. Tirana is small, you know. But I have to try to explain to them in not very good Albanian, that, no they didn't have an apartment, and no, they didn't have a pension, and no Air Force One wasn't going to come and fetch them and make their world better. Distorted lives. And it's happened to a number of persons.

Q: Even today, that is an issue: the protection of Americans. Obviously there are more Americans now coming to Albania, I presume; business people, and others. But protection of Americans despite the changes is still pretty hairy?

RYERSON: Well, we have a travel advisory. Sort of warning people medical care is not up to western standards.

Q: There's no prohibition on travel?

RYERSON: Correct.

Q: You can get a visa from an Albanian...

RYERSON: Outside of the United States. They're not issuing visas yet, here. And I hope to persuade them to drop the visa requirement and have been talking with the foreign minister, I've been talking with the President. I've talked with the prime minister. The level of access is unbelievable. In part, it stems from what the Communist Party called my interference in the internal affairs of Albania during the election campaign.

Q: Well, did you get messed up in internal affairs?

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RYERSON: So I was accused. I spoke up in favor of democracy, and the Communists chose to interpret that as being favoring the Democratic Party. I got myself really, got mouse trapped by...

Q: You were already there as ambassador by then?

RYERSON: Yes. This was in the Spring of '92. But in February, early February, I was in Korca. And the day before I called at their invitation on the Communist Party leader, Socialist Party, as it calls itself. And there appeared on that evening's television, a rather partial view of my discussion. In the first, place I hadn't expected TV and all the fuss with that. And then, I popped off the next day in Korca, which is in the Southeast, in a public meeting...

Q: A good Albanian...you were understood, in other words.

RYERSON: No, I wasn't understood, I was using an interpreter. And I was asked why I had done this, and this and that, and I said, well I knew I would be receiving Albanian hospitality, and I thought I was dealing with an Albanian and obviously I was wrong. As it turned out, he was not operating in the Albanian tradition. And I added "...as for the Communists, I wish them a long life, good health", and you could see jaws dropping in the audience...

Q: Somewhere else! (laugh)

RYERSON: "And unemployment after the March elections." (laugh)

Q: Oh, beautiful! (laughs)

RYERSON: This got the party very angry, they issued a declaration saying they were sure this was Ryerson's personal view.

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Q: And ask Mr. Yeltsin, he has similar views!

RYERSON: Well, they are really stupid; they planted this declaration and my quote on the front page of the party rag, so it went all over the country! And, at my next public meeting I thanked them for printing it publicly. That didn't get reported, as you can imagine.

Q: They're learning! (laughs) And you shared this I'm sure with others, perhaps with our ambassador to Kuwait, who is accused of the same thing! Of speaking out in favor of democracy (laughs) in a country we just made more democratic, supposedly.

RYERSON: Yes, well.

Q: The thing is, this was appreciated I'm sure, ultimately. It was understood.

RYERSON: I'm sure it was, yes. And working as we did to promote political pluralism there, has also given us an impressive degree of access to the current leadership. It's an access which we take care not to abuse. But is a very friendly open access. I'm back here, as you know, because the Albanian president came to see President Bush, and I wanted to go along!

Q: Did you have dinner?

RYERSON: No. No.

Q: No dinner at the White House, yet?

RYERSON: No. No. This was an informal visit by President Berish...

Q: It went well, I hope.

RYERSON: It did go well. The meeting with President Bush, was particularly good. Anyway...

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Q: Let's return to the protection of Americans in Albania, then we'll go back thirty years into your career. This access for Americans, it is now open, and Americans are beginning to enter Albania. What kind of protection issues do you have?

RYERSON: Most of the Americans that are coming are ethnic Albanians. They're going to visit family. They left with bullets flying over their heads, or it would have been bullets, if the Secret Police had known that they'd left by stealth decades ago, and they're going back to see folks. There are some Americans, a few, fortunately only a few, who have come in a great rush to adopt Albanian children. Q: Oh, yes! Like in Romania?

RYERSON: Oh, yes. Yes, right. That kind of worry. Since just before the elections, the Albanian Government put a stop to foreign adoptions. Full stop. Nobody. But there have been troublesome cases of fraud, as is usually the case. The Americans involved are operating in good faith. They've gotten a hold of a local attorney; they're aren't very many of those because that really wasn't kind of allowed during the regime. The attorney has produced what appeared to be the proper court documents, and as it turned out in a couple of the cases the person from the orphanage authorized to...said, you know, this child had been turned over to an orphanage, therefore was abandoned, was a person not authorized to act on behalf of the orphanage. So the whole thing is based on fraud.

Q: But this probably can get on to a proper sequence eventually, so that adoptions can...

RYERSON: Yes, fortunately there are very few cases that are involved in the, if you will, in the pipeline of, sort of at some stage of things. I met with a member of Congress, along with somebody from CA, just last week, to discuss one case, just explained what it is. And frankly, we don't know, in that case, where the birth parents of the child are! And the child may have been abandoned, the child, in theory, could have been kidnapped! We don't know. Just stolen from somebody. And then...

Q: But a reasonable investigation is made of it, and ...

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RYERSON: Yes, but in the meantime, of course, the American parents have bonded to that child, like super glue to your eyelid! I mean, whop! Understandably, because they were acting in good faith.

Q: Sure, sure. Which is, as you said in the beginning, most of the cases are that! They are all acting in good faith!

RYERSON: Yes, and then there is this, oh my god, there's this lovely child. And I want to get him out of here because there is not adequate nutrition available in the country. And this is going to stunt his growth! And it will! And this will cause malnutrition, and it will...and they could do much better for him! And we could! And I'm sure that these are not people who are trying to get a person for nefarious purpose! It's genuine! It's troublesome because...

Q: It's human!

RYERSON: It's very human!

Q: And with children involved, it's even more human. The one last, not that it won't come up again, but the one formally last question on your Albanian consular experience. What is your prognosis... when the embassy becomes "normal" in the way of immigration visas. What kind of migration out of Albania to the United States do you think there will be?

RYERSON: Duck! The demand for visas is going to be very large. Now these thousand Americans who have gotten their passports, or will have gotten them, probably won't travel to the United States themselves. These are persons of our age. But for their children, they can try petitions.

Q: Sure, sure!

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Their children are going to have problems meeting the public charge requirement, but the Albanian community here can probably find them some entry level jobs, and it will start. But there will be, now what does a thousand produce in the way of immigrant visa cases? Not 20,000 a year.

Q: Not in the first instance.

RYERSON: No, no. Not 20,000 a year, but...hundreds of them a year.

Q: A lot of them will have jobs, because they will be younger people who need jobs, there'll be people with contacts of some sort.

RYERSON: Yes, well the need for jobs. Unemployment in Albania is now 70% - seven zero - 70%. And...

Q: Oh, dear! And we have a lot of young people?

RYERSON: The median age is 26.

Q: You've answered the question. That is...

RYERSON: Yes, there will be...certainly for a while, an uncontrollable demand, or nearly uncontrollable demand for non-immigrant visas. I suppose after some time, there may be a tendency to say, well I fall in such and such a category. It's worthless to even bother, therefore, seek to go through Mexico, or something like that.

Q: Because you sense a lot of refusals, for the obvious reasons that people cannot get an immigrant visa. And they're going to use the non-immigrant visa for the way in.

RYERSON: That's right. They intent to come, work, return to Albania. And, you know, someone said, "how do you said bracero in Albania?" There is a need, and the Albanian

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government, has expressed official interest, in exporting temporary workers. That was raised by the President. With the President.

Q: It was that important?

RYERSON: Yes, it is! It is that important!

Q: Too bad they're not sheepherder, or something like that, we could have a special program for Albanian sheepherders!

RYERSON: Oh, my god, they are! I mean, there are lots of sheepherders!

Q: Oops! Don't hear this in California!

RYERSON: Well, Mr. McCarran, are you still alive? (laughs)

Q: He is in spirit.

RYERSON: One of Albania's tragedies is that it started its reform much later than anybody else. And this whole business in the 50's and 60's and 70's of southern Europeans, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, going to work in France, and Germany and Belgium, isn't now particularly open to Albanians. Q: It's not open to many people. It's the opposite direction. The pen direction, we want to keep them out of our country. Including the United States!

RYERSON: Exactly! Not in my back yard! Indeed.

Q: That's right. So you don't see any special program for these extraordinary suffering people in the United States?

RYERSON: As you know, it would take a change in legislation.

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Q: Oh, that's easy. We do that every year. You know that Bill. We'll get into that in a moment.

RYERSON: Great. Then whistle up some for this year for Albania!

Q: But, but seriously do you sense that any, sort of, political emotional thing. Or are there no PACs [Political Action Committees], if you will, here pushing the Albanians?

RYERSON: No. The Albanian community here is very divided. It's divided by, as Albanian is by religions, Albanian don't take that very seriously. But as....

Q: Is it Christian versus...

RYERSON: Seventy percent Moslem, twenty percent orthodox, Albanian orthodox, ten percent Roman Catholics. But, also divided because part of the community is ex-Kosovo, part is ex-Macedonia, ex-Montenegro, and...

Q: We don't have the Yugoslav, sort of thing coming do we? Where they're going to be at each other's throats?

RYERSON: No, no. No, no, no! The Albanians are peaceful.

Q: Bill, let's get back to Berlin, now. Were you doing consular work there? Or, general?

RYERSON: Well, the consular work I did was to pray fervently when I was Duty Officer that there would be no consular thing, or that I could get hold of the consular duty officer, of which there was one in Berlin, because I didn't know beans from apples about consular work in Berlin. I had gone off without even an introductory consular course. So, I was really praying that there'd be somebody around to deal with it, or that it wouldn't happen.

Q: And there were certainly consular issues in Berlin?

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RYERSON: Yes, there were consular issues, but...

Q: I mean, Americans got into trouble.

RYERSON: You know, Secretary Rusk once said that in any world where two thirds of the people are awake at any one time, there's bound to be trouble somewhere! (Laughs) And with Americans, yes, of course, we can find artful ways to get into trouble. But I didn't have to deal with those. What I was dealing with was within the mission, as sort of staff aide, being an extra pair of ears for my boss...worrying about the ambassador coming up from Bonn every now and again. The ambassador was then, George McGhee, a very active person. And it was, you know, first job in foreign service, so I was really kind of learning how an unusual post operated. Because there was the mission in Berlin...

Q: In those days it really was unusual.

RYERSON: Yes, it was! There were things like the last pre-unification Bundesversammlung which elected the Federal German President. The Soviet MiGS buzzing the city to show their displeasure, and our oldest child's first word was "airplane" because we had to explain what all this racket was, these jets buzzing at about 700 feet just below the sound barrier. It's a hell of a rattle! A little bit dangerous; a little blockading on the autobahn.

Q: And, in some way, perhaps, the potential sight of World War III. Always hung out there.

RYERSON: Yes, it was real. But I say, as I said before, I was there for Kennedy's visit, and then the emotional reaction in Berlin to his death in November. And then the rest of Berlin is just a little bit of a blur. But the great...

Q: It comes with age!

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RYERSON: Right, old timer's disease! The real pleasure there was that there seemed to be a very, very good group of people at the Mission. And this was a reinforcement for my college failing experience. Do what you want to do. What I wanted to do was work with good people! And...

Q: And learn your new trade!

RYERSON: That was less important. But enjoy, sort of, what I was doing. And umm...that was there, in all kinds of little small attention span kinds of jobs, that inevitably are part of being a staff assistant in the front office.

Q: Where did you go after Berlin, then?

RYERSON: Beach boy, Barbados! (laugh) And that's what I was teased by my boss when I was going off there. And that was to a consular job. And I thought, hmmm, well, I'll do it and I'll get it over with. Because the prejudice was fully developed by that point.

Q: Was this because the system said, "You shall have a consular assignment in your first two or three tours!"

RYERSON: I don't know. Roughly, yes. But not anything specific.

Q: But you hadn't asked for it?

RYERSON: No, but I thought, all right, I'll do it. And I'll be the best damn Consular Officer you ever saw!

Q: Were you?

RYERSON: I don't know. Probably not. As a matter of fact, before the days of CAT, there was a two-person team that came down to investigate these, and...

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Q: *That's C-A-T, CAT. (laughs)*

RYERSON: Right. Consular Assistance Team. The Consular Assistance Team consisted of one horse's ass, whose name I will not mention, and one very, very competent person, who said, for no reason, "you didn't think of it," as she suggested something, and I said, "well I should have thought of that!" And she said well, you're right here and you're close to it. And somebody coming in from the outside can sometimes see something that another person can't. The effective half of that CAT, was B. J. Harper!

Q: *Oh, yes. One of the participants in our Abba Schwartz project*

RYERSON: Well, if you're doing this, and you're only getting a fraction of one percent return on it, don't bother doing it! Oh, all right. It was sort of a new way of looking at it.

Q: *You mean I can do that?*

RYERSON: Exactly. And I learned, gradually, with increasing hair loss, that you learn what you can get away with not doing, what short cuts you can take, and how you can be practical and live, yes with the rule, you don't break the law. But you sometimes bend it very badly. And if you do bend it, or you have to do something extraordinary, then you document and state why you're doing that extraordinary thing!

Q: *All the laws, I think the lawmakers would agree, were written with grey areas. When you're dealing with immigration matters, for example, and that's the only law for the most part that consular affairs really has, laws are written to try to reconcile various contradictions and counter demands. So, therefore, lawmakers really want you to use your good common sense. But they won't tell you that!*

RYERSON: Right, but you learn that you can, and you learn...

Q: *Yes, and you learned it early.*

Library of Congress

RYERSON: ...what you can get away with. Yes, well...

Q: Well, get away with. What is effective, I would argue.

RYERSON: All right...had a case of a young lady who needed to travel, a passport, right she needed a passport.

Q: This is an American.

RYERSON: Yes. She needed a photograph, obviously. It was panic city! The only photograph was a picture of her (laughs) standing on the front porch, you know, from twenty feet away, and you could see three feet above, and three feet below her, and all around, and obviously...

Q: It wasn't like the book says!

RYERSON: It wasn't like the book said, but I figured if she was going to be able to travel, that was going to be it, and so we issued it, and...put a notation on the application that this was done for this reason. And there was never any major fuss from the department.

Q: And, maybe a little note to the U.S. immigration officer explaining why.

RYERSON: Well, we put a note on the...

Q: Right on the passport.

RYERSON: Right on the passport, saying this was the only photograph available, and in an emergency, and, therefore, although it doesn't meet the requirements, blah, blah...as long as people know that you've not really forgotten the requirements, and you've done a passing nod to them, you can go ahead then and do what's necessary.

Library of Congress

Q: So your first lesson that I'm hearing from your first consular experience, is use your head. Serve the public in the best way you can, and let the rules and regulations and laws carry out what is good for people.

RYERSON: Well, yes. Another lesson there, was dealing with an ambassador who didn't like laws. And who was vicious toward a vice consul, who was my subordinate. I was a vice consul but within six months of being there, ended up running the consular section, for which I was not well prepared. Sort of on the job learning.

Q: Hadn't even taken the course yet?

RYERSON: No I'd take the course, but we ended up that year, being the 20th largest immigrant visa issuing posts in the world!

Q: Barbados being a large visa post, more than just Barbados. Because you had other islands, as well.

RYERSON: We had all the other, at the time, there were nine sub-quotas, which in the transition went from a hundred a year each, to 653 a year each. And then Barbados became independent, and at the time it was...

Q: It was 20,000.

RYERSON: No, no. Basically no limit.

Q: No limit? Right! This was right...

RYERSON: This was '67, '66-'67. So, you know, all kinds of management stuff. Learning by doing. And in fighting a battle, of sorts, with the ambassador.

Q: And you were the leader of the Section, so you had no one to turn to but the ambassador, or the DCM.

Library of Congress

RYERSON: I didn't turn to the ambassador, the DCM was, yes, but a DCM.

Q: Did you have any other colleagues in the building that knew something of what you were going through?

RYERSON: No, I was the senior consular officer there!

Q: Well, the administrative officers?

RYERSON: No experience.

Q: So you were, indeed, on your own. Yes...talked occasionally with Washington. Your reward will come in the next life! (Laughs)

Q: Just don't get in trouble!

RYERSON: It think that was Helen Mulhearn, said, "Your reward will come in the next world!" And just sort of hang in there. And, at one point, it was actually doing something I would have trouble with now, as chief of mission. Withholding visa records from the chief of mission, who was releasing them to the individuals.

Q: This is back to this lawless ambassador. But, what, can you give us some examples that won't lead you to the courts, and be, have him sue you or has he left the world?

RYERSON: No, he's still alive, I think.

Q: Well, in any event, do you have some examples of how you worked with a person for whom you have, how shall we say, little respect?

RYERSON: Well, I sought to minimize contact. Sort of, very deliberately. And, I learned, or I thought I learned, how to sort of condense what it was you had to tell any boss. Because

Library of Congress

he doesn't have time to listen to what Mrs. Smith told you, what led you to believe that she wasn't really entitled to a visiting visa. I had to put it in terms that they could understand.

Q: And, also could accept because you had to know what the boss' predilections were, and you could set it off with a flame, if you said the wrong thing.

RYERSON: Yes. well if you said anything that he didn't want to hear, you'd set him off in flames. But I also learned that something the old visa manual used to contain and the latest version doesn't, which was an exhortation to listen to persons of standing in the community. Somebody who might say, well look, you know, Fred here doesn't look like a very good bet for a visa, but I know him, and he's coming back. And he's not going to work, which is a classic concern. The Caribbean island, underemployment, overpopulation, and so on. And I learned that there were a number of persons I could trust. And who I could trust, and who filled that old, sort of, definition. A person of standing in the community.

Q: Really trust, in the sense, we know, unfortunately, there are a lot of people, Prime Ministers included, that guarantee, and are doing it as a political favor, rather than as a matter of honor.

RYERSON: No, this was, was a politician, he was the ex-mayor of Bridgetown, after being there a year, we moved from one house to another, and ended up a half a block away from him. And our children used to go up there, partly because they had television, and we didn't. But also partly because they became grandparents in residence for our kids. And umm...that man, that we are still in touch, and that was in 1967-68.

Q: He is now retired, and..

RYERSON: Oh, he was already retired as mayor then, and now...long since retired, and probably pushing 90.

Library of Congress

Q: But you knew. How did you find out? Through experience obviously, but other ways that you could trust this man's interventions?

RYERSON: Well, now, the first time, there's always a little trepidation. Umm...partly, sort of relying, well is he a person of standing in the community. Does he have reason to lead me astray?

Q: Which is usually the reason. They have reasons to lead astray. Money, or influence, of some sort.

RYERSON: He was retired from his political career, but he knew a lot of people. Barbados is a small place, anyway. And he never led me astray. No case that he ever touched, ever went wrong.

Q: You were two years in, do-it-yourself consular work in Barbados, is that right?

RYERSON: Two years...

Q: When you left there, you had served your time?

RYERSON: I thought, I had served my time, but I found I liked it. And this was one of the criteria I had learned in college. I liked it and I said, I...I won't seek another consular position, but I will never resist another consular assignment. Did not seek one. Came back, worked in the Ops-Center [Operations Center], one of these crazy shift work things, did well, including a little bit of, sort of consular related, things. I saw a cable come in one night from a post in Italy, reporting the death by carbon monoxide poisoning, of a man, his wife, and a young child. It was addressed to some address in California. Sure enough, about five hours later, three or four in the morning, Washington time, this hysterical man telephoned from California and said, he had gotten this telegram, could I please tell him it wasn't so.

Library of Congress

Q: You'd love to.

RYERSON: My babies, my babies...and I've dealt with a number of death cases involving Americans, and I've never seen him, and I never saw him, and I don't know his name. That was one of the tougher ones. But it was the kind of thing I like doing, because it was contact with people, and I had to tell him very gently, but absolutely firmly, no I could not tell him it was wrong. It was, in fact true, I had seen the telegram. Yes, it was awful. But, that it was so. And...

Q: The human kind of consular that sometimes is tragic, but important. Vital.

RYERSON: Well, the human side of diplomacy, and I happen to think that that human side of it is reasonable preparation for any part of it. Because if you're telling the prime minister, no you're not going to support his government, you're also dealing with conveying disappointing news. And you learn to do it in ways that give the least offense.

Q: I have the impression that no all of our colleagues in American diplomacy would agree that such experience was that helpful. I obviously share your view completely. Have you seen some of our colleagues who, sort of, look down on the lessons of consular work?

RYERSON: Not the good ones.

Q: That wasn't my question!

RYERSON: Not the good ones. No, but damn it! That's relevant. Not the good ones, and they may not, themselves...have done a whole lot of consular work. But they know what it involves. Say, to give a very good example, Bill Woessner who was retired, was the Senior DAS [Deputy Assistant Secretary] in European affairs, had been DCM in Bonn. When I served in Bonn, he was the DCM. And I never worried about having huge lots of telegrams to go through, because he would spot the consular things, or anything related to consular, whether I was on distribution or not. I had the DCM doing my cable sorting!

Library of Congress

Q: Your cable sorting! (laughs)

RYERSON: Sort of, but he was a person who did appreciate the human dimension of diplomacy. There's a human and there's a political dimension, too. And it can be...consular work can be politically very important, whether it's bilateral, the Indian president taking up with the American president, as he did, in 1977-78. Visas of J-2 visas, you may have been around when that...

Q: It sounds familiar.

RYERSON: Trying to write papers, in 70 pages or less, to tell the President what he ought to say, the Indian president says, "No. Mr. Carter, what about a J-2 visa?" (laughs) A what? No. But that kind of thing does, and there is a dimension to it that gets very political very quickly. On visas. We saw it in Germany, when the law was changed to prohibit the issuance of visas to certain persons, for loss of a better term, who were war criminals. Find the file, the whole drill to go through, to check that person's name out. A couple of experiences. I got a visa application from a member of the German parliament. His name was on the list. Oops! So I called up, spoke to his secretary, she said, "Oh, (in German) I think you better speak with him", and the next thing I knew I was speaking to this member of the German parliament, saying, "sir, it's about your past." "I want to clear my name". It won't work, you know, in the time frame you have now, use your DIP [diplomatic] passport and the A visa that you have, and when you get back we'll work on it. When he got back he called me. He wanted to come in, I said, "no, I will come and see you." I went, sat in his office, extraordinarily interesting. Open, he said, you know, "our family has really nothing to hide, we don't talk about it publicly, but yes, my mother did shelter two Jews." He was in the SS officer corp, in the closing days of the war. Drafted, and it was sort of arbitrary at that time whether you ended up in the Wehrmacht or the Waffen SS. And his name was, indeed, cleared. It was clear that he'd not been up to anything.

Library of Congress

Another case, an individual resisted coming in for an interview, called everybody and anybody, including the Chancellor's office, and the ambassador's office, repeatedly trying to get out from under the interview. And...it was exactly nine months to the day, until the man showed up for the interview. We said, interview anytime. His name was cleared. But I had the feeling, as I quoted in the cable that I sent in, "nor circumscribed alone their growing virtues, but their crimes can find confined. Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne, and shut the gates of mercy on mankind." Because the son-of-a-bitch would have done it if he would have had the chance. And he still would have done it, and his is a very well known name in Germany, so I will not mention it. But, very, very political dimensions to it.

Q: What you're reminding our readers is that diplomacy and politics involve people. They're not books, they're not theories. They are people relating to other people.

RYERSON: And, it's sort of about consular affairs, and my experience in it. But I would point out that there is a "people dimension". And the training in it, and the use of language, and I think, sometimes, we tend not to recall what a number of senior officers in the department in the '60's, would speak of as consular work as a training ground in language. You know, you spend two years on the visa line somewhere using language "X" and you speak it pretty well.

You don't deal in the subjunctive. You deal in the fundamental language of the country, and you better understand it. Yes, and you deal in the subjunctives, occasionally. And you get the vocabulary, and you learn a few curse words along the way, and it's very helpful. Because, you should know that the person who just smiled at you and said something terrible about what your mother might have been up to, you know, so you understand his words, it makes it easy.

Q: In the visa determination department, it does.

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Well, yes, but you know when you've been insulted and when you've not. But I think that, people occasionally speak of chucking the consular function or getting rid of a visa function, or no, we shouldn't leave that to the Immigration Service to do that anyway. I don't know what percentage of our senior officers who are language capable, have learned some or improved some of their language on a visa line. But I would bet it's not insignificant. And I don't know where you would get that intense stuff, elsewhere.

Q: I think your own recent experience in the Albanian language is of interest. I think the readers would find it fascinating to know how you came about learning this, to some of us, exotic language. Certainly when it was a country that had no contact with anybody it was indeed exotic. Tell us, Bill, how you came to the Albanian route?

RYERSON: No. I'll hit Polish first, I had a class of training, you know, FSI, ten months, nine actually, they shorted it a little bit. Then went to Poznan, Poland.

Q: German, you had learned before?

RYERSON: Yes, I had some in college, I had some at FSI. And then three years in Berlin, and I tested out at 4-4 a couple times...I opened my mouth and it flows, I don't even have to think about it.

Q: You were equipped with German, and you've added to it Polish?

RYERSON: Polish, Serbo-Croatian, and now some Albanian. And I have a little bit of high school French. Sort of, cocktail party French.

Q: Sauve qui peut. (laugh) In any event, back to your Polish

RYERSON: At any rate, and I got out of that with a 4-4 in Polish, partly because Poznan was isolated and you had to use it.

Library of Congress

Q: 4-4 is the language designation, I should tell our readers, that's very good; that's almost bi-lingual, but not quite. But this grade is at the end of your Poznan assignment, not at the end of the Polish training?

RYERSON: Yes. At the end of Polish training, I had 3-3 plus, I think. No, I did a direct transfer from Poznan and went to Vienna for six months. Left Poznan in June, was tested the following January, and...so I figure it was really, it was a solid one.

RYERSON: Well, you felt secure in it.

RYERSON: Well, I felt secure, but I had a funny experience, you know, they do the test, and then you go out and you wait, and, you know, sort of, like a father expecting triplets or something, you sort of wait. And they said, "...would you mind coming back in, we're a little uncertain about what grade we would give you?" You know, oh my god! Another two hours of nail pulling. And I got back in, this was January of, when would it have been, January of '74.

Q: This is after your Operations Center, directly...

RYERSON: Yes, yes, Operations Center, polish language, Poznan, two years, direct transfer to Vienna, only...

Q: 1974, then, we've got ourselves to.

RYERSON: Right. And...

Q: You realize that's almost twenty years ago? Sorry about that! (laughs)

RYERSON: Well, you have me on crutches! (laughs) I got back in, and said, "Now suppose," they were trying to set up, to get me to open up a little bit, and they hit the right button, they said, "Suppose you were visiting the president, or something, and you found out later that your conversations in the Oval Office had been taped," so I was, I had

Library of Congress

become sort of a Watergate junkie. And I exploded. And it was damn the endings, full speed ahead, and I said my piece. And they said, "O.K."

Q: They made you angry.

RYERSON: Yes, I got so angry. Well...

Q: It's an old trick. They did the same thing to me in Russian. And I just took off. I don't know what the subject was, but I just took off, because I was no longer thinking of the exam, I was thinking of the issues that we were discussing.

RYERSON: Right, and there's also a little bit, whether you can control the language when you're angry. And sometimes you are angry, and you have to control it. I had that experience just before the March elections in Albania. Where I was being deliberately lied to by an official...

Q: In the Albanian government?

RYERSON: In Albanian, and I knew that what he was saying was false, and I couldn't let him know that I knew this was false.

Q: Did he know that you spoke, that you were speaking in Albanian?

RYERSON: Speaking in Albanian, yes! There was an interpreter there who was interpreting for my deputy, who doesn't speak Albanian as well as I do, not that I speak it all that well.

Q: Better than most Americans!

RYERSON: Right. But control when your angry is a test. You can break down, damn the endings, full speed ahead. Let them sort out the endings, but you can communicate, or

Library of Congress

when there's a need to, when I didn't want to reveal that I knew that he was lying. A real, real solid kind of control. But that, you asked why did I come to learn Albanian.

Q: Well, now that the Polish experience...

RYERSON: Well, then I learned Serbo-Croatian. Yes!

Q: I mean, If we're going to do this sequentially, you have to...

RYERSON: But the Serbo-Croatian leads...

Q: Same experience, you went through nine months of Serbo-Croatian...

RYERSON: I shorted it a month, again, it's a ten month course, and I shorted it a month to...

Q: To go to...as

RYERSON: To go to.

Q: You see, the reader doesn't know these things! (laugh)

RYERSON: I see...

Q: You are a stranger to this person.

RYERSON: There's a very short person inside that [tape recording] box! Went to head the consular section in Belgrade, having been in Bonn in the interim. Five years in Washington.

Q: You from Polish language to...

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Polish language [and Poznan], three years; Vienna, three years; back in Washington for five: visa officer for two, Berlin desk for two, Visa Office for one year; then Bonn.

Q: O.K.

RYERSON: Four years in Bonn.

Q: *O.k., so you've taken a good twelve, thirteen years, and compressed it for us. Now, Serbo- Croatian, because the theme here is language.*

RYERSON: And to Belgrade. And while there....got an extra position...lots of fraud problems. And a lot of the fraud involved native speakers of Albanian, of whom there are approximately three million in the borders of old Yugoslavia. What was Yugoslavia, actually.

Q: *Former, we use this quite often now; with Yugoslavia, with the Soviet Union.*

RYERSON: Former Yugoslavia, particularly in Kosovo. Which is now part of Serbia. But also in Montenegro and Macedonia. I will hire a fraud assistant, a fraud investigator, but that person's also going to have to speak some Albanian.

Q: *Was there a reason why there was more fraud in that area than in other ethnic areas?*

RYERSON: Poorer...and there'd been some enterprising airline representatives selling tickets, and frankly assisting with the fraud. They would make arrangements for the person to fly. Belgrade/ point "X"/ head of a national airline/ Mexico. And they would be met. Now these are people who speak only Albanian, who show up in Mexico City, and suddenly find that they're in the suburbs of San Diego. Well, bull feathers! You don't, I said, you met Jos#, and you spoke to him in Albanian, of course, and...right Charlie! It's not plausible.

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Obviously this airline representative was involved. Q: This was happening while you were there as CG?

RYERSON: Yes. Q: Were you part of the ensnaring of this evil plot, or...

RYERSON: No. Immigration Service discovered part of it, we were aware of things, going on. At any rate, a fraud person, someone who speaks Albanian, and I had him.

Q: Let me just ask, linguistically speaking, an Albanian speaker, from Montenegro, or Kosovo, applying in Belgrade for a visa, would speak what language to use the interviewing officer or to the local staff?

RYERSON: Usually, he or she would have some kind of Serbo-Croatian, but not always. Sometimes, it was Albanian, only. They would bring an interpreter with them. And one of the reasons that I wanted to have someone, is precisely so that we could, sort of, control the interview. Then after I hired him, I thought, hmmm...suppose he says to the visa applicant, "recite the seven times table, and I'll tell this jerk whatever I think he needs to know, so that you can get your visa. And then you meet me in the alley and I'll..."

Q: And it will be 5,000 hookadukes! (laughs)

RYERSON: Right...so I asked him to teach me, so I also felt that this would be a way that he would come to feel part of the Embassy. Albanians in Yugoslavia, at the time, and even more so now, look for some of the racism that was emerged in Serbia.

Q: Re-emerged.

RYERSON: Re-emerged. Were looked down upon. You could take a statement made by some Serbs about Albanians, substitute the word, excuse me, substitute the word 'nigger' and hear 1952 in Mississippi. It was that kind of thing. Now the Serbian legation, in Tirana,

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Albania, in 1928, sent a dispatch to the Foreign Ministry in Belgrade, which began with the words, "because these are not of human kind." And that mentality hangs on.

Q: This isn't just for the Albanians, though from what we're seeing on television. They, the Serbs feel this about some of their other neighbors, too!

RYERSON: The Albanians are at the bottom.

Q: Again, I'm taking you from your, the linguistically...

RYERSON: Albanian, our readers should know, is not a Slavic language. It is an Indo-European language, as is Greek.

Q: Illyrian?

RYERSON: Yes, it's thought to be descended from the ancient Illyrian... Greek...Urdu.

Q: Roman, Latin, Urdu?

RYERSON: Urdu is an Indo-European language. But it's a family all its own.

Q: Caught by the mountains, maybe; you have the tribes?

RYERSON: Yes, the Germanic languages here and Romance off there, and Greek by itself, Albanian by itself, yes. Sort of.

Q: Almost as bad as Hungarian and Finnish!

RYERSON: Which, of course, are not Indo-European languages. Quite separate. You know, there are lone words, which you recognize...

Q: That were taken from...

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Well that thing that rides on rails and is pulled by a locomotive. That is a 'train'?

Q: *'Train' with many new vowels...*

RYERSON: No. T-r-e-n.

Q: *Oh, T-r-e-n, kind of...*

RYERSON: This is a 'wall'...

Q: *French for wall...*

RYERSON: German, also, and tavolina. Italian.

Q: *I would have thought the Italian would have provided a...*

RYERSON: Well, it is for some things, the verbs. Oh, the verbs! Different, take my word for it!

Q: *Even worse than Russian?*

RYERSON: Yes, there are a couple of extra moods in the various...there's a form of a verb you use to express surprise. Oh, is it really me? Is it really raining? we do it with certain locutions in English. There's a whole separate verb form just for that. Anyway, I will learn a little bit. A, it will make this fellow feel, perhaps, a little more part of...

Q: *Did he take to your learning this? Or...*

RYERSON: Yes, he did. And...I will be able to monitor a little bit what he's interpreting and it is just sort of fun. And I got hooked! Then I tried to make arrangements, made

Library of Congress

arrangements to study it, was going to do a two-week immersion course in Prizren, down in Kosovo. And went...

Q: The Embassy was supporting you on this undertaking?

RYERSON: Well, yes, I was doing it on my own, but the embassy was, thought it was a fine idea. I made the arrangements to go, for January, when I made them, I went down at Thanksgiving time and talked to this professor, fifteen minutes of non-stop Albanian. The man wouldn't shift to anything. He agreed he would do this immersion thing...

Q: You were immersing indeed?

RYERSON: Well, you know, I was out of his office, down the street, with him throwing nouns at me. This is a this, and this is a that, and when you go into a shopping place, this is an egg...this is a blah, a blah, a blah...whew! Finally, got the man to shift to Serbo-Croatian and then on the telephone several times, always in Albanian. I sweated every time.

Q: It's physically hard on telephone!

RYERSON: Called me about ten days before I was to go, and said, and I quote, "Billy, I have been obliged not to do it." In perfect English. Serbs had gotten to him and told him you will not.

Q: Why?

RYERSON: I presume they didn't want an American diplomat in Prizren in January of 1990. And, indeed, during the time I would have been there, things started happening in Kosovo. So, I am not persuaded that, that, perhaps, wasn't planned ahead of time.

Q: Yes, yes.

Library of Congress

RYERSON: At any rate, he said, "Oh, you will learn it!" Well, to go back to linguistics, I did then get a teacher in Belgrade, who was the official interpreter for the Serbian Assembly.

Q: Because there has to be a Ser...

RYERSON: Actually, bilingual Serbo-Croatian/Albanian. He spoke no English. So I was learning Albanian through Serbian. And that made an extra challenge. Many Albanians speak English; they learned it through BBC, or they learned it as the Prime Minister told the Deputy Secretary of State: "Oh, I found a book for learning English!" But it was in Russian.

Q: Learned Russian, in order to learn English!

RYERSON: In order to learn English! Yes, and that's not unusual in Albania.

Q: So, when you went through these various experiences of being able, or not being able to learn Albanian relatively easily, what did you end up as a number, as a score, as we call it.

RYERSON: Never tested in it!

Q: There's no one to test you!

RYERSON: Well, they have somebody to test now. I ended up with a second instructress, a lady who was a refugee from Tirana, now living in Australia. And I was doing some seven and eight hours a week, one on one, in the Spring of '90, in Belgrade. I think on a good day, I might have had an S-2.

Q: Oh, that's all?

RYERSON: Oh yes.

Library of Congress

RYERSON: 'Cause it is hard!

RYERSON: It is difficult...

Q: More so than Serbo-Croatian, for example, or Slavic one, like Polish?

RYERSON: No, it's different, and I'm that much older.

Q: Yes, and it's harder!

RYERSON: It's harder!

Q: From this incredibly challenging assignment, which took you circuitously to be ambassador of Albania, you went to the Visa Office, if I'm not mistaken?

RYERSON: Oh, yes. When I got back from Belgrade, I was assigned in the Visa Office.

Q: Bill, we now have got you back into visa work again, and in the Department of State. You and I were together, in VO, as we call it, some ten years or more earlier than that. When I was in the job that you went back from Belgrade to, the deputy director, you at the time were director of...

RYERSON: Acting director of the Coordination Division. Actually, my last assignment as deputy director of VO was my third time there. My other tour there was as office director of Public and Diplomatic Liaison which was more of a management kind of thing. Struggling with the perennial file room problem.

Q: Let's wrap up the three VO experiences, as seen from the State Department at home. Tell us your impressions, tell us all the things we need to know.

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Oh, mmm....it isn't too well understood, and the best example of that was the early days, my first incarnation in the Visa Office, sort of the early days, and I don't recall if you were there for that or not, but the first couple of weeks of the Carter administration.

Q: Yes.

RYERSON: When we got involved in writing paper...

Q: *Yes, I can still see J.C. on the side of one of the memoranda...*

RYERSON: Because some even thought: "Oh, we don't give visas to communists. Well, we'll change that," not understanding that it was legislation that needed to be changed, and not some silly rule by...

Q: *Some previous administration.*

RYERSON: Well, yes. Red scare days. And it was a matter of educating them, agreeing with their purpose, but educating them to the realities of it. And...writing a paper that Ms. Watson said, "This is what we will do, and we will do it well."

Q: *Ms. Watson, at the time, was the....*

RYERSON: She was, actually, when I started the administrator of the Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs, and then the Congress changed the title and the position to be the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs. She was also one of my heroes.

Q: *She was a heroine to many of us. And, if you read some of the many other interviews, you would field her well documented as a heroine.*

RYERSON: Well, she was a hero to me, because while I was in Poznan, Poland, I went to Vienna to attend a consular conference, which Ms. Watson chaired. And I went back to Poznan, and said to my wife (and I don't mind being quoted because I've quoted it to Ms.

Library of Congress

Watson herself after she retired as ambassador of Malaysia) that "if this is what is at the head of it, I want in!"

Q: Many a person felt the same.

RYERSON: But I was, it was in those words. And, of course, it was her purpose to write the paper, which would explain the origin of this ban on communists entering the United States. What needed to be done to change it, where the political traps were, and the traps within the building.

Q: Maybe the difference between the Congress of the United States, and it's authority, and the Executive Branch and it's authority, sometimes isn't always understood by newly arrived administrations.

RYERSON: Newly arrived administrations, hell! It was a career foreign service officer who was reported to do it! He shall remain nameless. But it caused me to go in and write a paper, which obviously didn't pass ultimate muster, but which at least was a starting point in dealing with the attempts of the administration to seek a change in the law, which resulted ultimately in a visit by the Attorney General and the Secretary of State, to the respective committee chairmen on the Hill, where they were told there would be no changes. Went through the process of thorough, and appropriate review, within the administration, and then exploring the possibility for change with the congress. No, no, no, for an answer, and dealing with that, and then administratively making it as easy as possible, to proceed with what the law provided, which was for waivers for person ineligible because of their communist pasts.

Q: This was communist party association-oriented only. This wasn't a broader sense of inadmissibility?

RYERSON: No it wasn't a broad inadmissibility. It was basically political inadmissibility. Which meant, basically, communist.

Library of Congress

Q: Which then brought about the McGovern Amendment?

RYERSON: Yes, it brought about the McGovern Amendment.

Q: Which I think our reader needs to be told about.

RYERSON: Which said, basically, all right. The law says, these folks are ineligible for visas, and allows for a waiver. The McGovern Amendment, in my understanding, said, "and Mr. Secretary of State, you will recommend a waiver, unless you are prepared to certify to the House and the Senate, separately, that to recommend a waiver in instance 'X', would be contrary to the security interests of the United States."

Q: And document it!

RYERSON: And stating why. Well, that's a little more than just, you're ineligible, we don't dare to seek a waiver before your recommendation. You will recommend a waiver!

Q: Now that came, at what point in your two year tour there?

RYERSON: Sort of toward the end of it. And...we said that applies to then, among others, because it mandated this waiver recommendation for persons found ineligible simply because of membership in a proscribed organization. And, several of us said, right. That includes membership in communist trade unions, it includes membership in the PLO, which, of course, doesn't have members, it's a group organization, umbrella organization. But at any rate, sort of, simple membership in an organization belonging to the PLO. Well, that didn't survive very long, because congress amended the McGovern Amendment to take out those two, reinstating what we had sometimes referred to as 212(a)-George Meany, meaning communist labor leaders were not to get visas, thank you very much! You may recall, that during the writing of that paper, it was essentially the entire Department of State against the Special Advisor for International Labor Affairs, who was bigger than all of us put together.

Library of Congress

Q: And George Meany told Governor Averell Harriman, who at the time was the Special Assistant to the Secretary, or whatever, "if you want to have your name on the front pages of all the newspapers of the United States, just try and change this one!"

RYERSON: Yes, well. It was very clear that this one was going nowhere.

Q: But how were you involved? This is the Coordination Office. What does coordination mean; that sounds like a euphemism?

RYERSON: Well, it isn't. It coordinated the work of the Intelligence community, the Immigration Service, and the political desks of the State Department, in considering the visa application from person 'X' from country 'Y'.

Q: So your office explicitly coordinated the case. You had to clear with all of these different elements? And get them to agree?

RYERSON: The coordination, yes. At least agree to something! The Coordination Division, as I thought of it, was in very many ways, the parallel to the political section of an embassy overseas. It was where the political work in the visa office was done. Because these security considerations were basically political considerations. There were very few instances where a person was an out-and-out bomb throwing terrorist. Usually it was because of membership in a communist party. Or membership in some terrorist organization. Highly political cases! Just think of a few of them, and you could do it. The case of Rory O'Brady, an Irish Republican Army terrorist, who was convicted of throwing bombs, and convicted. In his autobiography he described how he raked the front of a British Army barracks with machine gun fire. Just because they were British military people, and not because, you know, Lieutenant Smith over there had been fooling around with O'Brady's sister, or anything like that. It was strictly because of the position that they held. That was coordination, but it was coordination among those elements.

Library of Congress

Q: And it was usually...

RYERSON: Political dimension.

Q: But little disagreement on somebody who was clearly a murderer, an assassin, a terrorist?

RYERSON: Certainly not within the administration. It was disagreement with one particular member of Congress.

Q: But, but you coordinated not with Congress, you coordinated within the Executive Branch. And you made your decision, and the Secretary of State acted accordingly? That the Congressman...

RYERSON: Well, the Secretary's minions acted accordingly.

Q: Well, yes, but in the name of the Secretary, and in the name of the Attorney General. That's the procedure, is that correct?

RYERSON: That's right.

Q: But if a Congressman disagrees...

RYERSON: You were granted a waiver for 'X' or 'Y'....

Q: A person was ineligible, he applied for a visa, was found ineligible because we had information that said he was ineligible, for the most part.

RYERSON: He was ineligible, he was a communist party member, or in one case, he was the prime minister of a small country, and we knew that he was a communist party member...

Library of Congress

Q: But nobody else knew!

RYERSON: And he didn't know that we knew, and we coordinated, really lived up to the term, with the Immigration Service, and arranged for a silent waiver of that ineligibility, arranged for notifying the Immigration Service about his travel plans, because they had obligations, under the law, to report the entry of such "subversive" citizens into the United States.

Q: And your role was literally to contact all of these people within the Executive Branch, and perhaps even respond to those outside the Executive Branch, like interested parties, people that were giving a seminar that the man was coming to attend, or members of congress, for example. That's what you spent most of your time doing?

RYERSON: Coordinating, rather than answering the outside. It was much more an internal sort of job. The external was done by you!

Q: Or you, when you got the job! (laughs)

RYERSON: Or me, when I got the job, yes. (laugh) Not so much done in coordination.

Q: Were these fairly "easy" to do? Did they usually speak for themselves, and you had little battles?

RYERSON: Oh, there were battles, occasionally, a lot of it with any job, there are a lot of routine sorts of things. Routinely getting passport waivers for persons coming from what was then Rhodesia, we didn't recognize passports issued by the Ian Smith regime, so we got routine passport waivers for these African students coming to the United States.

Q: That has nothing to do with terrorism or communism, or anything. That is a purely political determination!

Library of Congress

RYERSON: It was a political determination, we are not going to accept, it's a legal determination, as well. Our immigration law defines passport as a travel document which is blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and issued by competent authority. And Ian Smith was not a "competent authority." So we didn't deal with those passports. They were just interesting pieces of paper, but of no value as a passport, as far as you are concerned. Those are all routine. You get an occasional one with real, sort of, whammy power, that took...the thing I have in mind, was a call from the Immigration Service saying, there is a Uganda Airlines 707 inbound for Miami, due to land in an hour, or an hour and a half, whatever it is. We have been told that Idi Amin may be on board!

Q: Oh, get him! (Laughs)

RYERSON: Should we admit him, or should we not? And on what authority? And I thought, whoops! And, of course, it was 12:30, and you weren't around, you were at lunch. I called the Op's Center, and said I needed to get word from the Bureau of African Affairs, and very promptly, and described what it was. Five minutes later, I had a call back, I don't recall if it was he, or if it was somebody relaying the word, but the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs said "don't admit him." And, on his authority. And if he's there, just keep him on the plane, until the plane goes.

Q: He's inadmissible. On what ground?

RYERSON: ...basic, politically it would have been impossible to have him enter the United States. The justification, you ask me now, at the time it was just simply do they admit him or do they not admit him...technically he didn't have a visa. He would have been, in my opinion, inadmissible, under what was then Section 212(a)27 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. As a person whose very presence in the U.S. would have caused serious foreign policy complications for us.

Library of Congress

Q: You know, I'm glad you mentioned that, it came as a natural example, but in the job that I had when we were working together, that was one of the more difficult areas I had, personally. A little bit professionally, also. To define what's in the U.S. national interest. Did you ever find any difficulty there? I'm thinking, for example, of a university that is inviting a professor to give a lecture on something. He is not ineligible as a terrorist, or party association, but he is not in the U.S. national interest. Of course, no example comes to mind. Do you remember facing quandaries like this? And, if so, how did you solve them?

RYERSON: Well, I can remember hearing of tales of screaming matches between the bureau of American Republics Affairs, and bureau of Consular Affairs. None of which, and they all, sort of, subsided and the echoes had died down by the time I had to deal with it. And the cases that I had to deal with, during my time, were a little more clear cut. We didn't want some notorious fingernail puller...we didn't want Mr. Amin...

Q: But how about an excellent Mexican author, renowned in the world, Nobel Prize winner...that we thought was a troublemaker and didn't say nice things about America?

RYERSON: I recall Ms. Watson, suggesting, telling me that she suggested to the then Attorney General of the United States, there would be a hell of a lot less, I shouldn't use that term...but a great deal of difficulty to admit the person, and let him bore his audiences to death, than to exclude him and give him some sort of martyrdom. This was a person who was not a terrorist, not a fingernail puller, and indeed I think her advice was sound.

Q: Bring all that experience, of seven, eight, ten years earlier, up to your more recent experiences as Deputy Director, albeit, for only a six months period, before you went off to Albania, never to return! No, no you have returned!

RYERSON: Well, never to return to the Visa Office job. And it was all a little bit distorted. I arrived back in the summer of '90, found myself shanghaied onto a senior [selection board] threshold panel.

Library of Congress

Q: Rewarded with such an assignment.

RYERSON: Shanghaied, to senior threshold panel...very valuable experience, I felt. I'd served on a promotion panel once before, at a much lower level, but a senior threshold panel is most interesting, because you're looking at whole careers.

Q: On whether they may it or not?

RYERSON: On whether they make it or not. At any rate, it was the beginning of November before I got to the Visa Office, and...

Q: And you left the following March?

RYERSON: Actually, April 10, is the day I got the phone call saying, "would you like to go to Albania?" 'Cause I had volunteered when I got back. I went and told the folks in Eastern European Affairs, "If you ever need anybody in Tirana." At this point we were talking with the Albanians; that was publicly known. "If you ever need anybody there, I speak a little Albanian." But, I was not involved further, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Albanians in March of '91, March 15th. I wasn't involved, I wasn't invited to the signing, and, you know, boooo! Poof! Nothing until April!

Q: And you're feelings weren't even hurt?

RYERSON: Well, I would, if I'd have known about it, I would have tried to weasel my way in to the signing, just for curiosity. But I didn't know about it, until...

Q: For the sake of luck!

RYERSON: No! I'd read about it in the newspapers, subsequently...but, yes. So it was that period from November '90, to April '91 that I was in the Visa Office, and the great

Library of Congress

preoccupation there was, "How are we going to deal with the revised immigration law!" It changed all kinds of stuff!

Q: B. J. Harper, in our interview, went into a lot of detail, but just for those readers that maybe have not, or will not be reading that, basically what was the main thrust of the changes? What were they?

RYERSON: Changed immigration policy, basically, allowed a lot more employment based immigration.

Q: So larger immigration numbers?

RYERSON: Larger numbers of immigrants, it abolished communist party membership as a ground for ineligibility for non-immigrants...and, to the dismay of all the computer folks, re-jiggered all the numbers which necessitated changes in all of the systems that would be used. It changed immigrant categories, did some fiddling with the numbers, made it very much more complex.

Q: Is this the one that gave the Irish a little special help?

RYERSON: That, too! What it did in lotteries, the "diversity" programs, and this and that, but Congress set about politically to do something to the Irish, and it did.

Q: Who had been disadvantaged over the years, because of...

RYERSON: No, they'd lost a favored position. They had not been disadvantaged, they had lost a favored position, which is different. Hey, I appreciate that, and I appreciate that everybody won't agree with me, but what it amounted to, was a great regression to pre-1965, when we had a racist immigration policy, and we now have it again. And I don't think it's particularly to my liking to...I wish it were otherwise.

Library of Congress

Q: Tell us how you see that manifest, other than the Irish phenomenon which we have specifically increased the number of Irish?

RYERSON: In 1965, full effect in '68, it was, sort of, first come first serve, everybody get in the same line kind of a thing.

Q: And it was 20,00 per country?

RYERSON: It was 20,000 per country maximum in a given year. And some countries regularly hit that ceiling, and, sort of, bounced off it. The Philippines, Korea, Pakistan, India, Mexico. Other countries came nowhere near it! But, doing something for the Irish, and a few other groups.

Q: 'Cause there are a few others. It isn't just an Irish favoritism?

RYERSON: It was. Well, there wasn't in the first visa lottery...no Irish favoritism. The Irish got a good chunk of that, but in the current lottery, it is Irish favoritism; reserves 16,000 of the 40,000 numbers.

Q: Forever! This is not something that ever...

RYERSON: For the duration of the program, which is a three-year thing!

Q: Oh, well, then it will go back to a normal equity?

RYERSON: That will be decided by the Congress, in its wisdom.

Q: But the law says that it will only last for three years.

RYERSON: No, the others, who were then advantaged, were countries who's immigration to the United States was determined statistically to have decreased after the 1965 Act.

Library of Congress

This was mostly countries in western and eastern Europe, although not exclusively. Indonesia was one of the countries whose...

Q: Dominican Republic, too I think, was one? For some reason. Well, there are a number of countries that are getting larger in quotas, and I wondered if you had any insight into that?

RYERSON: I don't. I never really learned the 1990 Act.

Q: You went off and hid in Albania! (laughs)

RYERSON: I went off and hid in Albania, right. Albania is one of the countries which benefits from...there's 34 countries that were, and 21 Albanians made it in this current lottery. Which, I understand the Post Office in Merrifield, Virginia has vowed never to allow it to be repeated! 'Cause it's one of these, envelopes arrive, it's not a true lottery, it's more...I think it's described by Mr. Scully as a crap shoot!

Q: That's exactly the term he used in our interview, yes! Were there impressions you got there..the law changes were thrown in your face, but things continued. I mean, we still had to do our business, I presume?

RYERSON: We had to do business, and it was trying to manage it, knowing that it was going to be roughly a fifty percent increase in the number of immigrant visas to be issued.

Q: We're talking about bodies now, that have to be added to the consular work force!

RYERSON: Well, there weren't enough bodies already to deal with the existing workload, and therefore, you know, a real crisis coming on, with a fifty percent increase in the immigrant visa workload.

Q: How were you involved in that, Bill?

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Well, trying to at least coordinate within the Visa Office, how do we deal with this, and it was my job to specifically coordinate regulations changes with the Immigration Service, 'cause they have a role also. And, trying to keep things in touch. Not writing them, but just be sure that each side knew what the other was up to. In, sort of, general policy approach, and things as, quite as specific as which the heck symbol can you use for this or that or the other kind of visas, so that it would be compatible with everybody's computers! And then, oh no! Immigration Service says, you can't use that symbol because remember pre-'65, there was...and these people were still traveling and they were re-entering the country and, as permanent resident aliens, with the old symbol 'X2' or '01' or whatever it was under discussion. So, it was a matter of doing what seemed like a lot of highly paid people worried about trivia, that weren't really trivia. And try to manage the change!

Q: We think sometimes even presidents and vice presidents find themselves involved in trivia, but that's a bigger picture! Albeit a short period, Bill, you mentioned computers several times. You mentioned resource management, you mentioned INS. Those three things were, are and always will be issues. Well, maybe not the computer, but certainly human resources, and getting on with the job. What were some of your impressions, again, over a short period, of the computer, for example, in the sense of the different programs that you and I have been associated with over the 15 years of our visa association?

RYERSON: Very, very, useful tool. And I thought to get a computer added in Belgrade, to get the NIVCAPS there.

Q: You didn't have that, oh?

RYERSON: No, and we didn't have...

Q: NIVCAPS being the non-immigrant visa computer assisted program systems.

Library of Congress

RYERSON: The non-immigrant stuff. And I fussed and fumed and hollered and cajoled and recruited people to fuss and bitch at the Department of State, and they finally, to get me to shut up, gave it!

Q: Gave you one. You used the same technique I did!

RYERSON: But, without the umbilical cord link to Washington. Even without it! And I was getting Belgrade ready to enter the mid-20th century, 'cause I felt there was a serious fraud problem there, and we needed that extra resource. It's a very handy thing, and it can save a lot...'cause I trained people there. We put that in Belgrade, I put it in! And we didn't have the usual training things, we didn't have the ability to check back and...

Q: You might find it amusing, but I was asked very recently, like two months ago, to go out into the field and see if I could define, do an analysis of, a program to teach consular officers how to use computers: visa computers, consular computers. We still do not have an orderly method to teach people. But, in any event, your own experience is: yes, it is necessary. Is it well used in the field?

RYERSON: My experience is that people are scrambling for them, and could use more, and it's sort of, give it to us now, don't wait for...

Q: Is it a human resource replacement? It is your experience that you can save positions?

RYERSON: No, you can save position increases—you can't; because the workload has been growing. This visa waiver program, which I'm sure has been discussed elsewhere, was also a great workload preventer, and it did indeed drop the overall visa workload. But that won't work for countries like Albania, or Mexico, or some other places where a visa waiver program could lead to wholesale migration to the U.S., to take employment.

Q: In your three experiences, but more the latter two, did you find that the leadership in consular affairs agreed that this approach was a way to help us?

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Well, the leadership, and it was certainly leadership when Ms. Watson was there...and I don't know that the current leadership in C.A. understands computers, or the visa function. So that's kind of hard to say.

Q: Your experience was not enlightening in this regard?

RYERSON: Not particularly.

Q: But based on your experience with Ms. Watson, a veritably strong leader, you'd agree that leadership is a pretty important part of what we're talking about? Especially in visas, and coordinating with other agencies, and...

RYERSON: Oh, sure it's part of it! And that was very clear. It's not the whole thing! There's other classical consular work to be done, not just passports, but assistance to Americans, dealing with people. And that's an important part. But, face it, there are probably few persons who will ultimately have the kind of understanding of consular work that Ms. Watson brought to the job.

Q: She was a lawyer, recent position holders have not been lawyers, at least the present one. Is she, or not? I'm not sure...Ms. Tamposi?

RYERSON: I don't know that she is. I think probably not.

Q: Well, certainly, a lot of our work is very legal oriented.

RYERSON: As a person fond of telling lawyer jokes, (laugh) I don't think that's necessarily a disadvantage! I think the sort of thing that your grandmother and mine would have called horse sense, or common sense, is probably what qualified Ms. Watson, even more than her legal training. Although that certainly did no harm.

Library of Congress

Q. Some of the other people interviewed—I believe Dick Scully alluded to the importance of the political appointee having the right contacts in the right place on the Hill, in the White House, or wherever. Did you, do you have any insights into that?

RYERSON: It's important, but from the positions that I've had I've not been able to judge, I've not been in a position to judge. There has always been importance.

Q: Another issue. With the Visa Office positions you've had, you certainly have been screamed at, yelled at, and complained at, by your colleagues in the field?

RYERSON: Oh, yes, and I've done some of it myself. And I've reciprocated some of it.

Q: Do you think this is just a given?

RYERSON: I think it's normal. Because you write something, and unfortunately we all suffer from a tendency to say that it's perfectly clear, or will write a telegram that said, "This morning I saw," and not realizing that three days from now, this morning doesn't make any sense to anybody, particularly if the telegram has been cleared for two days. And it's that kind of thing, all across the board! The only person reading the telegram sees the words you put in it. You know, make it clear. If you're writing a telegram about a visa case, get all the facts down. Get the persons name, visa category, date and place of birth, because that might be relevant to his visa qualification. And, so on, and his nationality, and blah, blah. You know, a little bit of lead in, because...

Q: But you with thirty years of experience, or nearly....we're talking really about training maybe half of our consular officers, aren't we? At least half of them are first or second tour officers?

RYERSON: Yes, and I've been involved with training, not a few, but also not a few FSN's. And that's important, too! Because they're doing a lot of the work overseas, and ultimately they help train officers, or can.

Library of Congress

Q: Or mistrain them!

RYERSON: Umm...I've not seen any mistraining by any sense. I don't know how many other people spend how much time really, really pushing it. I just sense that that's improved a little bit, of late. But there are more officers spending a little bit more time, encouraging, in a sense, correspondence courses. I spent a little bit of time doing that in Belgrade. Where no one had ever taken or finished a correspondence course. And I got this fellow who was an Albanian speaker, and another person, to take the visa course. I met with them every week, and gave them a sort of oral quiz, and went over the material, and really, really kept after them...as we left, gave them, they had just taken an exam. A little file, sort of thing, gave them each a commemorative half dollar coin, silver, one of those proof sets. Very nice, and several of the other FSN's said, "Oh, gee, if we'd known that, we'd have taken the course!"

Q: Anything for a half a dollar! (Laughs)

RYERSON: Well, this was a beautiful thing with the Statue of Liberty on one side, and was very neat.

Q: It was the thought.

RYERSON: No, but that training is important. The training, my own training in consular affairs pre-dated ConGen Rosslyn. I've seen people come out of ConGen Rosslyn, and I think they do a reasonable job. Exception, they tend to think that everybody they're dealing with are a bunch of would-be wetbacks. And, that's...

Q: There are a lot of them out there, wetbacks!

RYERSON: Yes, fine, but I think you know what I mean. It's that, everybody is just dying to get to the United States and stay. Well that isn't so. And it ends up with a, sort of, a cop mentality on the visa line. And, this occasionally leads to public relations problems. A

Library of Congress

member of the legislature of former Yugoslavia complained to me about the arrogance of one of the vice consuls.

Q: This is back to the junior officer, half of our work force, maybe even larger. Is the junior officer, first or second tour, led by more experienced supervisors who are balanced in attitude, with a good sense of public relations? How can we do the better job of getting the junior officer more enthusiastic about what they're doing and not approach the visa applicant, "they're all wetbacks". Or feel so overwhelmed by the negative aspects of the visa line?

RYERSON: It isn't easy. I think good managers, including good consular managers, have to pay attention to what those officers are doing. Sometimes, the physical setup doesn't help with that. Sometimes it does. We had a good opportunity in Bonn. Two of us, Marsha von Duerckheim who was my deputy, and I got to kibitz on the design of the consular section. And we ended up with a, sort of, 'L' shaped thing. Interview windows, everybody could, you could hear what was going on at other windows. And there was a chance immediately to correct someone headed down the wrong path in an interview. Or, say a word here or there, and it was done with a lot of respect. She and I also did visa interviews there, and had lots of repeats from refused persons. We encouraged our junior officers to bring out a case that we had dealt with previously. If they thought the visa ought to be issued, to issue it. To override us.

Q: Learning by collegial interface.

RYERSON: Yes, right. Kibitzing. A very informal kind of thing.

Q: And it wasn't resented, or...

RYERSON: No, it wasn't. The German expression is, "Der ton macht der Musik"; the tone makes the music. It's the tone in which you do it. An important part. Some DCM's can

Library of Congress

judge how their consular section heads are doing that with their subordinates, if they're good. They know what's going on.

Q: And look for that, as a...

RYERSON: Yes, and judging. Umm...not all do.

Q: Bill, as we near the end of our interview, 'cause I know you've got to go catch the train, or whatever it is, back to Albania...you're leaving actually when?

RYERSON: Sunday.

Q: Sunday. We wish you a wonderful trip. Do you have any, sort of, overall views, as a result of your experiences over, near thirty years? On immigration, in general? Where do you think we're going? Do you think we could have done it better? Yes, we could have. Any last words, as you look into the future?

RYERSON: Gee, I feel like I'm sitting at the last supper, and about to go off and be crucified!

Q: To be rewarded!

RYERSON: Last word. Immigration policy will be determined by the congress, as the Constitution mandates. And it won't be determined by you and me, or the Visa Office or the Immigration Service. We'll have our little voices to add to the whole political discussion.

Q: Political. Immigration is political.

RYERSON: You bet your bippy it's political! (laugh) It is quintessentially political! It is not technical, it is: "where will the country go? Who will be the Americans in the future?" Have you got anything more political? Well, obviously those folks born here, but we're talking

Library of Congress

about, what does it matter to the population increase in this country. It's been largely from immigration in the last ten years. Otherwise we would have had zero population growth.

Q: And it's changing in terms of it's ethnic composition? Any reaction to that?

RYERSON: This is the way that Congress wished to be!

Q: Just the voice of the people, in this case?

RYERSON: Right! Now, I think if the Congress, or if a large part of the population, says, "Well wait a minute! We don't want so many Asians. We don't want so many this' or that's' in the country," then it ought to be discussed openly. Q: Do you think it could be?

RYERSON: Poorly, poorly.

Q: There was a congressman today who said he didn't like people coming in who didn't understand English! Didn't speak English! That's a high demand.

RYERSON: Well, that would have kept out some of my ancestors, who spoke only Dutch when they arrived.

Q: Maybe even some of the congressman's; we don't know.

RYERSON: I don't know.

Q: What I'm getting at is there are a lot of conflicting, contradictory popular voices going into this mix, of what the American population should be.

RYERSON: That's what the Constitution says, to be the case! It's called politics! And I don't find anything wrong with that. Now you can argue that there should be a language requirement, or whatever. I don't think a language requirement would be, an English

Library of Congress

language requirement, would be a particularly good thing. How much English did Einstein speak when he came to the United States? I don't know.

Q: But these are all different requirements. The Congress, for whatever reasons can put them into a new immigration act, which we're bound to uphold.

RYERSON: Probably not any time too soon. My understanding of the political scene after the last act was passed, is that they didn't want to have to deal with this octopus for another five or ten years.

Q: I'm told one of the members from Texas said, "I don't want ever to see immigration matters, as long as I'm head of the Judicial Committee of the House!"

RYERSON: Well, yes, but "ever" is sooner...

Q: Is two years for a congressman!

RYERSON: Well, yes, it could be, I don't wish him unemployment, necessarily. But, actually things that are said to be temporary usually last longer. The temporary buildings that were still on the Mall when I arrived in Washington were put there during World War II!

Q: Or the location of the present Visa Office! Which is supposedly temporary!

RYERSON: Temporary, right. No, but the Congress will deal with that, and I think you're right. There will be a shying away from a full political discussion, because if you get into it, there will be cries of racism.

Q: You don't feel a change in Administration, for example, would bring about a new discussion of immigration issues?

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Not necessarily. I think it would depend largely on Congress. I think we've seen in the past that it's very much not a partisan issue, and people are all over the map, politically on it.

Q: Another thing that affects migration, perhaps non-immigrants more, is the way we look—and spend so many hours and years—is keeping people out of the country. Does that change now?

RYERSON: Wait a minute, Charlie! We didn't spend years keeping people out of the country, because most people came in. Certainly by the '70's. Most people were coming in. There were passing few who were kept out, non-immigrants, who were kept out because they were members or former members of the communist party. Indeed, few immigrants. We spent a lot of our time figuring out ways that they could be admitted. And when I finally, on one particular case, threw a purple fit over the case of some guy who'd been part of the Praetorian guard of the Romanian Party, and said, "No, damn it!" he was a member, it was not trivial. He was for real! He was part of the guard, which worked for the Central Committee of the Romanian Party. And those guys were, if anything, politically trusted.

Q: So what you're telling our reader is something that maybe some of them do not know, and that is that, in fact, the visa function assists people coming to the United States.

RYERSON: It may, but it doesn't. It is a barrier, it is a numerical barrier.

Q: On immigrants.

RYERSON: On immigrants. But there are very few other barriers that exist within the law, except somebody who's an axe murderer, but if he or she is a spouse of an American, they can probably make it in. No, it's not too exclusionary. Would the Congress change it if

Library of Congress

the Congress were to take it up in the next year, or the next Congress? I personally rather doubt it.

Q: I really was getting into what some call the liberalization of the entry process; the inadmissibility of foreigners, given the decline or disappearance of many of the causes of inadmissibility. Do you think the law will become even more liberal? Will our frontiers be even more open, particularly to the non-immigrant?

RYERSON: Well, I think the big thing that's happened on the non-immigrant side, is the visa waiver for countries whose citizens certainly are not, have not historically been problems.

Q: Of course, they could have come any way!

RYERSON: They could have come anyway, but it was a pain to go get a visa. Now, we knew that the young single unemployed German, was a darn good bet for a visa. Because he could earn more on the dole in Germany than he could by casual labor here in the United States. He'd be coming back to Germany and likely wouldn't be working while he was here. So, those weren't problems. Now the issue will be, and I think it will continue to be, is this person coming to work, and if so, that's a no-no for a visitor.

Q: Not political. In other words, economic in the sense of, are they deceiving the real purpose of their trip to the U.S.?

RYERSON: Yes, right, Are they really coming to work? If so, then please get the proper kind of visa, thank you very much. Now, a visitor visa. Yes, we know you'll only be here for six months, but if it's your intent to work, then you need a different kind of visa.

Q: But, unfortunately the world still has great segments, great numbers of countries where economic privation exists, and therefore, they want to come to the land of...the magnet country.

Library of Congress

RYERSON: Yes.

Q: And that would be the basic non-immigrant visa adjudication.

RYERSON: Right, is the person coming back or is the person truly coming as a visitor, or is he an intending worker. And calls will not be easy. And what we're going to face very shortly in Albania, when we start doing visas there. A young, underemployed population.

Q: Well, with this being less and less of a political consideration, which we often think is part of our diplomatic training, it seems more of an economic one. Maybe we should transfer the visa function to some other agency that can focus on economic issues. Or put differently, and less perhaps sarcastically, do you think we should continue and maintain the visa function in the State Department?

RYERSON: I think so. I think it's a good training ground for diplomats. It certainly indisputably a good language training ground for diplomats. And languages are important. And you can deal through an interpreter, as I have done a fair amount in Albania, and now I understand more and can manage a meeting with a cabinet minister usually without an interpreter. But, where are people going to learn these languages? Reading the local press, and writing a report on, you know, not as well, not as many people...

Q: But an immigration officer can be trained in the language.

RYERSON: Wait a minute. Where are you going to get that immigration officer from?

Q: Well, you recruit them! The immigration officers who are now recruited have expanded requirements. Congress authorizes all of the...

RYERSON: INS Officers?

Q: Yes.

Library of Congress

RYERSON: These are persons who, right now, are being recruited for domestic assignments, not for foreign assignments.

Q: We would go out and start recruiting for positions overseas as immigration officers, adjudicators as they are now. They are adjudicators at the port of entry.

RYERSON: I don't see the value to the taxpayer in fragmenting the foreign service. I really don't. I think...

Q: Fragmenting the foreign service?

RYERSON: Well, you're going to get a visa adjudicator, who's going to say, "well fine, if you don't have a position for me now, and I speak this language and that language, I'm not going to take an interim assignment for two years as an economic reporting officer."

Q: So, the flexibility of assignments enters into the argument.

RYERSON: Flexibility of assignments, what are you going to do with a visa officer who is trained in, just to pick a casual language, Albanian?

Q: Well, like you can train him in an additional language, and send him to a new post, like your experiences.

RYERSON: All right. Are these persons going to be willing to spend, as I have spent, two years, that is 24 months, of my adult life at FSI, learning languages?

Q: If he's told to. That's part of the employment contract.

RYERSON: All right. Is he going to learn them well? We're arguing, we're worried about the quality of the person who's going out. He is an official. He's going to be an official that most foreigners will deal with first in the country. He damn well better be politically

Library of Congress

sensitive responsive. No, I just don't see it. For a bunch of reasons. Language, outlook, level of sophistication...

Q: Flexibility of assignments. Ability to be moved around more easily.

RYERSON: Yes. But...this sort of attitude you take. I'm going to be adjudicating visas for the rest of my life. Well, gee, I would not look forward to a career doing that.

Q: But you do know Bill, that that's exactly what I'm talking to for many in the State Department who wish to get rid of the visa function. It is not what a diplomat is hired to do! How do we answer them?

RYERSON: You're dealing with that old prejudice. How do you answer? Well, ask them who would do it.

Q: INS, is the quick answer. They'll tell you, get rid of it!

RYERSON: O.K. Then you're going to be the consul general in place "X" and you're going to have an INS Officer telling people, "no, no, no, no, no"!

Q: Well, I order him to tell them "yes, yes, yes"!

RYERSON: The hell you will! You don't have authority to do that! I know very well that as an ambassador, I do not have authority to order a visa issued, or a visa refused.

Q: Well, if he's my subordinate, he will.

RYERSON: You will have authority to send him home. And that's it!

Q: So you think it has to be a Foreign Service Officer?

RYERSON: I don't think it has to be a Foreign Service Officer, but like Churchill said of democracy, it's awful, but all the other systems are worse. I would tend to think that other

Library of Congress

systems would be worse. There should be that flexibility and a chance to do something a little different. Use the language again. Don't learn it just so that you can do visas. Do other things.

Q: And again, back to what you were talking about before, playing the role of the leader to inspire the person, to advise the person, to encourage the junior officer who's complaining about what is being put upon him, but showing him a more important role that he's playing?

RYERSON: Put it in the context of the bilateral relationship and visa adjudication is a multi-lateral function. It certainly is.

Q: Do you find that there are many of our leaders out there doing that—encouraging the junior officer to do a good job on the visa line?

RYERSON: Well, I'd like to think I tried, and I do know of others who do.

Q: You eluded to the Foreign Service training course, and that ConGen Rosslyn is sometimes giving an aura of keeping out the wetbacks. A negative attitude.

RYERSON: Yes. It does, and people get over that, and as I say, learn what's allowed under the law, and everything doesn't have to be negative.

Q: Maybe the training itself should be changed then. So that such an attitude isn't part of the atmosphere of teaching?

RYERSON: Well, maybe there's some kind of differentiation. You know, if your going to Switzerland versus going to the Dominican Republic, you're going to be dealing with different, obviously different sorts of people. Different economic situations, totally. And there aren't going to be very many economic migrants from Switzerland to the United States. And there likely will be, in the foreseeable future, from the Dominican Republic, and it's this that takes a while to adjust and you can't really do that completely at FSI.

Library of Congress

Maybe that should be mentioned. Maybe it should be mentioned a little bit more. I don't know the current...

Q: You haven't served in the Dominican Republic but you've served in a post in which there was a drive out of the country, in many ways: Poland. Poland is a country which...

RYERSON: At that time it was difficult to get a passport to get out.

Q: So you weren't faced with misrepresentation and fraud.

RYERSON: I faced it in Barbados.

Q: Oh, Barbados, yes!

RYERSON: A big drive to get out. Not the best.

Q: Did you find yourself being against them? Did you find yourself negative?

RYERSON: Oh, occasionally. I'm about as human as the next, I hope. And, so, of course, yes.

Q: And then learned to go past that. And then went on to a happier assignment?

RYERSON: There were few assignments that I liked better than the one in Barbados. I made more personal friends there than, almost anywhere else.

Q: Also, I think you started a reference to Barbados in terms of being a surf bum, or something to that effect.

RYERSON: Beach bum! (laughs)

Library of Congress

Q: Bill, your time is limited, the plane is revving up. I want to thank you very much for giving several hours of your time, and ask you as we bid farewell, if you have any last words. And this is not the last supper!

RYERSON: It's not the last supper, no, but I would just encourage people who do consular work to keep the human dimension in mind. Because it's part of everything else. It's an integral part, I submit, of our whole foreign policy. And we ought to hang on to it.

Q: With that, we wish you very much success in your new assignment, Bill, which is not so new now!

RYERSON: No, I've been over a year, off and on. Thank you very much.

Q: Thank you very much Bill.

End of interview